

THE MEDIA AND THEIR ATROCITIES

The first casualty in war is always truth, and the mass media have perpetrated many lies on behalf of their masters during the Balkans conflicts.

by Michael Parenti, PhD
© 2000

Michael Parenti Political Archive
Website:
www.michaelparenti.org/

TARGETING THE SERBS

For the better part of a decade, the US public has been bombarded with a media campaign to demonise the Serbian people and their elected leaders. During that time, the US Government has pursued a goal of breaking up Yugoslavia into a cluster of small, weak, dependent, free-market principalities. Yugoslavia was the only country in Eastern Europe that would not dismantle its welfare state and public sector economy. It was the only one that did not beg for entry into NATO. It was—and, what's left of it, still is—charting an independent course not in keeping with the New World Order.

Of the various Yugoslav peoples, the Serbs were targeted for demonisation because they were the largest nationality and the one most opposed to the break-up of Yugoslavia. But what of the atrocities they committed? All sides committed atrocities in the fighting that has been encouraged by the Western powers over the last decade, but the reporting has been consistently one-sided. Grisly incidents of Croat and Muslim atrocities against the Serbs rarely made it into the US press, and when they did they were accorded only passing mention.¹ Meanwhile, Serb atrocities were played up and sometimes even fabricated, as we shall see.

Recently, three Croatian generals were indicted by the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague for the bombardment and deaths of Serbs in Krajina and elsewhere. Where were the US television crews when these war crimes were being committed? John Ranz, chair of Survivors of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp, USA, asks: "Where were the TV cameras when hundreds of Serbs were slaughtered by Muslims near Srebrenica?"² The official line, faithfully parroted in the US media, is that Bosnian Serb forces committed all the atrocities at Srebrenica.

Are we to trust US leaders and the corporate-owned news media when they dish out atrocity stories? Recall the 500 premature babies whom Iraqi soldiers laughingly ripped from incubators in Kuwait? This story was repeated and believed until exposed as a total fabrication years later.

During the Bosnian war, in 1993, the Serbs were accused of pursuing an official policy of rape. "Go forth and rape", a Bosnian Serb commander supposedly publicly instructed his troops. The source of that story never could be traced. The commander's name was never produced. As far as we know, no such utterance was ever made. Even the *New York Times* belatedly ran a tiny retraction, coyly allowing that "the existence of 'a systematic rape policy' by the Serbs remains to be proved".³ Bosnian Serb forces supposedly raped anywhere from 25,000 to 100,000 Muslim women; the stories varied. The Bosnian Serb Army numbered not more than 30,000 or so, many of whom were engaged in desperate military engagements. A representative from Helsinki Watch noted that stories of massive Serbian rapes originated with the Bosnian Muslim and Croatian governments and had no credible supporting evidence. Common sense would dictate that these stories be treated with the utmost scepticism—and not be used as an excuse for an aggressive and punitive policy against Yugoslavia.

The "mass rape" propaganda theme was resuscitated in 1999 to justify the continued NATO slaughter of Yugoslavia. A headline in the *San Francisco Examiner* (April 26, 1999) tells us: "Serb Tactic Is Organized Rape, Kosovo Refugees Say". No evidence or testimony is given to support the charge of organised rape. Only at the bottom of the story, in the nineteenth paragraph, do we read that reports gathered by the Kosovo mission of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) found no such organised rape policy. The actual number of rapes were in the dozens, "and not many dozens"

according to the OSCE spokesperson. This same story did note in passing that the UN War Crimes Tribunal sentenced a Bosnian Croat military commander to 10 years in prison for failing to stop his troops from raping Muslim women in 1993—an atrocity we heard little about when it was happening.

A few dozen rapes is a few dozen too many. But can this serve as one of the justifications for a massive war? If Mr Clinton wanted to stop rapes, he could have begun a little closer to home in Washington, DC, where dozens of rapes occur every month. Indeed, he might be able to alert us to how women are sexually mistreated on Capitol Hill and in the White House itself.

The Serbs were blamed for the infamous Sarajevo market massacre. But according to the report leaked out on French TV, Western intelligence knew that it was Muslim operatives who had bombed Bosnian civilians in the marketplace in order to induce NATO involvement. Even international negotiator Lord (David) Owen, who worked with Cyrus Vance, admitted in his memoirs that NATO powers knew all along that it was a Muslim bomb.⁴ On one occasion, notes Barry Lituchy, the *New York Times* ran a photo purporting to be of Croats grieving over Serbian atrocities, when in fact the murders had been committed by Bosnian Muslims. The *Times* printed an obscure retraction the following week.⁵

The propaganda campaign against Belgrade has been so relentless that even prominent personages on the Left—who oppose the NATO policy against Yugoslavia—have felt compelled to genuflect before this demonisation orthodoxy, referring to unspecified and unverified Serbian "brutality" and "the monstrous Milosevic".⁶ Thus they reveal themselves as having been influenced by the very media propaganda machine they criticise on so many other issues.

To reject the demonised image of Milosevic and the Serbs is not to idealise them or claim that Serbian forces are faultless or free of crimes. It is merely to challenge the one-sided propaganda that laid the grounds for NATO's aggression against Yugoslavia.

THE ETHNIC CLEANSING HYPE

Up until the NATO bombings began in March 1999, the conflict in Kosovo had taken 2,000 lives altogether from both sides, according to Kosovar Albanian sources. Yugoslavian sources put the figure at eight hundred. Such casualties reveal a civil war, not genocide. Belgrade is condemned for the policy of forced expulsion of Albanians from Kosovo. But such expulsions began in substantial numbers only after the NATO bombings, with thousands being uprooted by Serbian forces especially from areas where KLA mercenaries were operating.

We should keep in mind that tens of thousands also fled Kosovo because it was being mercilessly bombed by NATO, or because it was the scene of sustained ground fighting between Yugoslavian forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), or because they were just afraid and hungry. An Albanian woman crossing into Macedonia was eagerly asked by a news crew if she had been forced out by Serbian police. She responded: "There were no Serbs. We were frightened of the [NATO] bombs."⁷ I had to read this in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, an alternative weekly—not in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*.

During the bombings, an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 Serbian residents of Kosovo took flight (mostly north, but some to the south), as did thousands of Romany and others.⁸ Were the Serbs ethnically cleansing themselves? Or were these people not fleeing the bombing and the ground war? Yet, the refugee tide caused by the bombing was repeatedly used by US warmakers as justification for the bombing, a pressure put on Milosevic to allow "the safe return of ethnic Albanian refugees".⁹

While Kosovar Albanians were leaving in great numbers—usually well-clothed and in good health, some riding their tractors or driving trucks or cars, many of them young men of recruitment age—they were described as being "slaughtered". It was repeatedly reported that "Serb atrocities"—not the extensive ground war with the KLA and certainly not the massive NATO bombing—"drove more than one million Albanians from their homes".¹⁰ More recently, there have been hints that Kosovar Albanian refugees numbered nowhere near that number.

Serbian attacks on KLA strongholds or the forced expulsion of Albanian villagers were described as "genocide". But experts in surveillance photography and wartime propaganda charged

NATO with running a "propaganda campaign" on Kosovo that lacked any supporting evidence. US State Department reports of mass graves and of 100,000 to 500,000 missing Albanian men "are just ludicrous", according to these independent critics.¹¹ Their findings were ignored by the major networks and other national media.

Early in the war, *Newsday* reported that Britain and France were seriously considering "commando assaults into Kosovo to break the pattern of Serbian massacres of ethnic Albanians".¹² What discernible pattern of massacres? Of course,

no commando assaults were put into operation, but the story served its purpose of hyping an image of mass killings.

An ABC *Nightline* show made dramatic and repeated references to the "Serbian atrocities in Kosovo", while offering no specifics. Ted Koppel asked a group of angry Albanian refugees, what specifically had they witnessed. They pointed to an old man in their group who wore a woollen hat. One of them re-enacted what the Serbs had done to him, throwing the man's hat to the ground and stepping on it—"because the Serbs knew that his hat was the most important thing to him". Koppel was appropriately horrified about this "war crime"—the only example offered in an hour-long program.

A widely circulated story in the *New York Times*, headlined "US Report Outlines Serb Attacks in Kosovo", tells us that the State Department issued "the most comprehensive documentary record to date on atrocities". The report concluded that there had been organised rapes and systematic executions. But as one reads further and more closely into the article, one finds that State Department reports of such crimes "...depend almost entirely on information from refugee accounts. There was no suggestion that American intelligence agencies had been able to verify most, or even many, of the accounts...and the words 'reportedly' and 'allegedly' appear throughout the document."¹³

British journalist Audrey Gillan interviewed Kosovar refugees about atrocities and found an impressive lack of evidence or credible specifics. One woman caught Gillan glancing at the watch on

To reject the demonised image of Milosevic and the Serbs is not to idealise them or claim that Serbian forces are faultless or free of crimes.

her wrist while her husband told her [Gillan] how all the women had been robbed of their jewellery and other possessions. A spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees talked of mass rapes and what sounded like hundreds of killings in three villages, but when Gillan pressed him for more precise information he reduced it drastically to five or six teenage rape victims. But he had not spoken to any witnesses and admitted, "We have no way of verifying these reports".¹⁴

Gillan notes that some refugees had seen killings and other atrocities, but there was little to suggest that they had seen them on the scale that was being reported. One afternoon, officials in charge said there were refugees arriving who talked of 60 or more being killed in one village and 50 in another, but Gillan "could not find one eyewitness who actually saw these things happening". Yet, every day, Western journalists reported "hundreds" of rapes and murders. Sometimes they noted in passing that the reports had yet to be substantiated, but then why were such unverified stories being so eagerly reported in the first place?

THE DISAPPEARING "MASS GRAVES"

After NATO forces occupied Kosovo, the stories about mass atrocities continued *fortissimo*. The *Washington Post* reported that 350 ethnic Albanians "might be buried in mass graves" around a mountain village in western Kosovo. They "might be" or they might not be. These estimates were based on sources that NATO officials refused to identify. Getting down to specifics, the article mentions "four decomposing bodies" discovered near a large ash heap, with no details as to who they might be or how they died.¹⁵

It was repeatedly announced in the first days of the NATO occupation that 10,000 Albanians had been killed—down from the 100,000 and even 500,000 Albanian men supposedly executed during the war. No evidence was ever offered to support the 10,000 figure, nor even to explain how it was arrived at so swiftly and surely while NATO troops were still moving into place and occupied but small portions of the province.

Likewise, repeatedly unsubstantiated references were made to "mass graves", each purportedly filled with hundreds or even thousands of Albanian victims, but such graves also failed to materialise.

Through the [northern] summer of 1999, the media hype about mass graves devolved into an occasional unspecified reference. The few sites actually unearthed offered up as many as a dozen bodies or sometimes twice that number, but with no certain evidence regarding causes of death or even the nationality of victims. In some cases, there was reason to believe the victims were Serbs.¹⁶

On April 19, 1999, while the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia were going on, the State Department announced that up to 500,000 Kosovar Albanians were missing and feared dead. On May 16, US Secretary of Defense William Cohen, a former Republican senator from Maine and now serving in President Clinton's Democratic Administration, stated that 100,000 military-aged ethnic Albanian men had vanished and might have been killed by the Serbs.¹⁷ Such widely varying but horrendous figures from official sources went unchallenged by the media and by the

many liberals who supported NATO's "humanitarian rescue operation". Among these latter were some supposedly progressive members of Congress who seemed to believe they were witnessing another Nazi Holocaust.

On June 17, just before the end of the war, British Foreign Office Minister Geoff Hoon said that "in more than 100 massacres" some 10,000 ethnic Albanians had been killed¹⁸—down from the 500,000 and 100,000 bandied about by US officials. A day or two after the bombings stopped, Associated Press and other news agencies, echoing Hoon, reported that 10,000 Albanians had been killed by the Serbs.¹⁹ No explanation was given as to how this figure was arrived at, especially since not a single war site had yet been investigated and NATO forces had barely begun to move into Kosovo.

On August 2, Bernard Kouchner, the United Nations' chief administrator in Kosovo (and Doctors Without Borders organiser), asserted that about 11,000 bodies had been found in common graves throughout Kosovo. He cited as his source the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (ICTY). But the ICTY denied providing any such information. To this day, it is not clear how Kouchner came up with his estimate.²⁰

It was repeatedly announced in the first days of the NATO occupation that 10,000 Albanians had been killed—down from the 100,000 and even 500,000 Albanian men supposedly executed during the war.

As with the Croatian and Bosnian conflicts, the image of mass killings was hyped once again. Repeatedly unsubstantiated references to "mass graves", each allegedly containing hundreds or even thousands of Albanian victims, were publicised in daily media reports. In September 1999, Jared Israel did an Internet search for newspaper articles that appeared over the previous three months and included the words "Kosovo" and "mass grave". The report came back: "More than 1,000—too many to list". Limiting his search to articles in the *New York Times*, he came up with 80,

nearly one a day. Yet when it came down to hard evidence, the mass graves seemed to disappear.

Thus, in mid-June, the FBI sent a team to investigate two of the sites listed in the war-crimes indictment against Slobodan Milosevic, one purportedly containing six victims and the other twenty. The team lugged 107,000 pounds of equipment into Kosovo to handle what was called the "largest crime scene in the FBI's forensic history", but it came up with no reports about mass graves. Not long after, on July 1, the FBI team returned home, oddly with not a word to say about its investigation.²¹

Forensic experts from other NATO countries had similar experiences. For instance, a Spanish forensic team was told to prepare for at least 2,000 autopsies but found only 187 bodies, usually buried in individual graves and showing no signs of massacre or torture. Most seemed to have been killed by mortar shells and firearms. One Spanish forensic expert, Emilio Perez Puhola, acknowledged that his team did not find one mass grave. He dismissed the widely publicised references about mass graves as being part of the "machinery of war propaganda".²²

In late August 1999, the *Los Angeles Times* tried to salvage the genocide theme with a story about how the wells of Kosovo might be "mass graves in their own right". The *Times* claimed that: "...many corpses have been dumped into wells in Kosovo... Serbian forces apparently stuffed...many bodies of ethnic

Albanians into wells during their campaign of terror." ²³ Apparently? Whenever the story got down to specifics, it dwelled on only one village and only one well—in which one body of a 39-year-old male was found, along with three dead cows and a dead dog. Neither his nationality nor cause of death was given. Nor was it clear who owned the well. "No other human remains were discovered," the *Times* lamely concluded. ²⁴ As far as I know, neither the *Los Angeles Times* nor any other media outlet ran any more stories of wells stuffed with victims.

In one gravesite after another, bodies were failing to materialise in any substantial numbers—or any numbers at all. In July 1999, a "mass grave" in Ljubenic, near Pec (an area of concerted fighting), believed to be holding some 350 corpses, produced only seven after the exhumation. In Djacovica, town officials claimed that 100 ethnic Albanians had been murdered, but there were no bodies because the Serbs had returned in the middle of the night, dug them up and carted them away, the officials seemed to believe. In Pusto Selo, villagers claimed that 106 men were captured and killed by Serbs at the end of March, but again no remains were discovered. Villagers once more suggested that Serbian forces must have come back and removed them. How they accomplished this without being detected was not explained. In Izbica, refugees reported that 150 ethnic Albanians were executed in March, but their bodies were nowhere to be found. In Kraljan, 82 men were supposedly killed, but investigators found not a single cadaver. ²⁵

The worst incident of mass atrocities ascribed to Yugoslavian leader Slobodan Milosevic allegedly occurred at the Trepca mine. As reported by US and NATO officials, the Serbs threw a thousand or more bodies down the shafts or disposed of them in the mine's vats of hydrochloric acid. In October 1999, the ICTY released the findings of

Western forensic teams investigating Trepca. Not one body was found in the mine shafts, nor was there any evidence that the vats had ever been used in an attempt to dissolve human remains. ²⁶

By late autumn of 1999, the media hype about mass graves had fizzled noticeably. The many sites unearthed, considered to be the most notorious, offered up a few hundred bodies altogether, not the thousands or tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands previously trumpeted, and with no evidence of torture or mass execution. In many cases, there was no certain evidence regarding the nationality of victims. ²⁷ No mass killings means that The Hague War Crimes Tribunal indictment of Milosevic "becomes highly questionable", notes Richard Gwyn. "Even more questionable is the West's continued punishment of the Serbs." ²⁸

No doubt there were graves in Kosovo that contained two or more persons (which is NATO's definition of a "mass grave"). People were killed by bombs and by the extensive land war that went on between Yugoslavian and KLA forces. Some of the dead, as even the *New York Times* allowed, were "fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army or may have died ordinary deaths"—as would happen in any large population over time. ²⁹ And no doubt there were grudge killings and summary executions as in any war, but not on a scale that would warrant the label of "genocide" and justify the massive death and destruction and the continuing misery inflicted upon Yugoslavia by the Western powers.

We should remember that the propaganda campaign waged by NATO officials and the major media never claimed merely that atrocities (murders and rapes) occurred. Such crimes occur in every war—indeed, in many communities during peacetime. What the media propaganda campaign against Yugoslavia charged was that mass atrocities and mass rapes and mass murders had been perpetrated—that is, genocide, as evidenced by mass graves.

In contrast to its public assertions, the German Foreign Office privately denied there was any evidence that genocide or ethnic cleansing was ever a component of Yugoslav policy: "Even in Kosovo, an explicit political persecution linked to Albanian ethnicity is not verifiable... The actions of the [Yugoslavian] security forces [were] not directed against the Kosovo Albanians as an ethnically defined group, but against the military opponent and its actual or alleged supporters." ³⁰

Still, Milosevic was indicted as a war criminal, charged with the forced expulsion of Kosovar Albanians and with summary executions of a hundred or so individuals—again, alleged crimes that occurred after the NATO bombing had started, yet were used as justification for the bombing.

The biggest war criminals of all are NATO and the political

leaders who orchestrated the aerial campaign of death and destruction. But here is how the White House and the US media reasoned at the time: since the aerial attacks do not intend to kill civilians, then presumably there is no liability and no accountability; an occasional apology for the regrettable mistakes is all that's required—as if only the intent of an action counted and not its ineluctable effects. In fact, a perpetrator can be judged guilty of wilful murder without explicitly intending the death of a particular victim—as when the death results from an unlawful act which the perpetrator knew would likely

By late autumn of 1999, the media hype about mass graves had fizzled noticeably. The many sites unearthed, considered to be the most notorious, offered up a few hundred bodies altogether, not the thousands or tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands previously trumpeted...

cause death.

George Kenney, a former State Department official under the Bush Administration, put it well: "Dropping cluster bombs on highly populated urban areas doesn't result in accidental fatalities. It is purposeful terror-bombing." ³¹

LAPDOGS OF THE SECURITY STATE

In sum, through a process of monopoly control and distribution, repetition and image escalation, the media achieve self-confirmation; that is, they find confirmation for the images they fabricate in the images they have already fabricated. Hyperbolic labelling takes the place of evidence: "genocide", "mass atrocities", "systematic rapes" and even "rape camps"—camps which no one has ever located. Through this process, evidence is not only absent, it becomes irrelevant.

So the US major media (and much of the minor media) are not free and independent, as they claim; they are not the watchdogs of democracy, but the lapdogs of the national security state. They help reverse the roles of victims and victimisers, warmongers and peacekeepers, reactionaries and reformers.

The first atrocity, the first war crime committed in any war of aggression by the aggressors, is against the truth.

Continued on page 81

Endnotes

1. For instance, Raymond Bonner's "War Crimes Panel Finds Croat Troops 'Cleansed' the Serbs", *New York Times*, March 21, 1999, is a revealing report that has been ignored in the relentless propaganda campaign against the Serbs.
2. John Ranz, in his paid advertisement in the *New York Times*, April 29, 1993.
3. "Correction: Report on Rape in Bosnia", *New York Times*, October 23, 1993.
4. David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, Harcourt, 1996, p. 262.
5. Barry Lituchy, "Media Deception and the Yugoslav Civil War", in Ramsey Clark et al., *NATO in the Balkans*, International Action Center, New York, p. 205; see also *New York Times*, August 7, 1993.
6. Both Noam Chomsky, in his comments on Pacifica Radio, April 7, 1999, and Alexander Cockburn, in *The Nation*, May 10, 1999, describe Milosevic as "monstrous" without offering any specifics.
7. Brooke Shelby Biggs, "Failure to Inform", *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, May 5, 1999, p. 25.
8. *Washington Post*, June 6, 1999.
9. See, for instance, Robert Burns's report, Associated Press, April 22, 1999.
10. For example, *New York Times*, June 15, 1998.
11. Charles Radin and Louise Palmer, "Experts Voice Doubts on Claims of Genocide: Little Evidence for NATO Assertions", *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 22, 1999.
12. *Newsday*, March 31, 1999.
13. *New York Times*, May 11, 1999.
14. Audrey Gillan, "What's the Story?", *London Review of Books*, May 27, 1999.
15. *Washington Post*, July 10, 1999.
16. See, for instance, Carlotta Gall, "Belgrade Sees Grave Site as Proof NATO Fails to Protect Serbs", *New York Times*, August 27, 1999.
17. Both the State Department's and Cohen's figures are reported in the *New York Times*, November 11, 1999.
18. *New York Times*, November 11, 1999.
19. Associated Press release, June 18, 1999. Reuters, on July 12, 1999, reported that NATO forces had catalogued more than 100 sites containing the bodies of massacred ethnic Albanians.
20. Stratfor.com, Global Intelligence Update, "Where Are Kosovo's Killing Fields?", Weekly Analysis, October 18, 1999, www.stratfor.com.
21. Reed Irvine and Cliff Kincaid, "Playing the Numbers Game", on website www.aim.org/mm/1999/08/03.htm.
22. *Sunday Times*, London, October 31, 1999.
23. *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 1999.
24. *ibid.*
25. Stratfor.com, *ibid.*
26. Richard Gwyn, *Toronto Star*, November 3, 1999.
27. See, for instance, Carlotta Gall, "Belgrade Sees Grave Site as Proof NATO Fails to Protect Serbs", *ibid.* [endnote 16].
28. Richard Gwyn, *ibid.*
29. *New York Times*, November 11, 1999.
30. Intelligence reports from the German Foreign Office, January 12, 1999 and October 29, 1998, to the German Administrative Courts, translated by Eric Canepa, Brecht Forum, New York, April 20, 1999.
31. Teach-in, Leo Baeck Temple, Los Angeles, May 23, 1999.

About the Author:

Dr Michael Parenti received his PhD in political science from Yale University in 1962. He has taught at a number of colleges and universities in the USA and abroad. He regularly appears on television and radio talk shows to discuss current issues and ideas from his published works, such as democracy and economic power, political bias in US news media, ideology and history, communism and fascism, and race, gender and class.

Dr Parenti's articles have appeared in *Covert Action Quarterly*, *The Nation*, *Z Magazine*, *Dollars and Sense* and numerous other publications. He is the author of 14 books, including *History as Mystery* (1999), *America Besieged* (1998), *Dirty Truths* (1996) and *Against Empire* (1995) (all published by City Lights Books). This article is excerpted from Dr Parenti's forthcoming book, *To Kill a Nation: The Attack on Yugoslavia*, to be published by Verso in October 2000. To view other articles by Dr Parenti, visit his website at www.michaelparenti.org/.

Editor's Note:

Copies of Dr Parenti's books are available from People's Video, PO Box 99514, Seattle, WA 98199, USA, tel 800 823 4507 (toll free in North America), fax +1 (206) 782 6253, e-mail peoplesvideo@vida.com.